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AUTHOR Alovisetti, Max; Weaver, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Three groups of 36, institutionalized retarded, noninstitutionalized retarded and normal children equated on mental age were evaluated on a measure of psychological distance, the Sticker Family Game. Significantly less psychological distance was found between the child and parental figures in the retarded groups than in the normal groups. (Author)

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PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE TO PARENTS IN INSTITUTIONALIZED, RETARDED AND NORMAL CHILDREN

Max Alovisetti

University of Rhode Island

and

Joseph Weaver

University of Kansas Medical Center

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SUMMARY

Measures of psychological distance have been interpreted as reflecting subjects' perceieved social relationships(Kuethe,1962) or as reflecting "degree of desired interpersonal intimacy or disassociation" (Tolor & Donnon,1969). Various studies have shown a relationship between extent of social deprivation and desire for adult contact (Tolor & Orange, 1969; Tolor, 1970). Other investigations have demonstrated the relationship between social deprivation of institutionalized retarded children and their greater responsiveness to social reinforcement by adults than children in less socially deprived environments (Butterfield & Zigler, 1965; Klaber, Butterfield & Gould, 1968; Zigler, Balla & Butterfield, 1968; Weaver, Zigler & Balla, 1971).

In the present study the performance of 3 groups of 36 children each were evaluated on a measure of psychological distance, the sticker family game. These were institutionalized retarded, non-institutionalized retarded and normal children equated on mental age and as closely as possible on sex.

The sticker family game is a felt board variant of Kuethe's

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social schema technique (1962), in which a father, mother and sexless child are simultaneously placed on a felt board in any order and distance from each other that the child wishes. In accordance with previous findings in institutionalized children, indicating a greater desire to interact with adults, it was hypothesized that the institutionalized children would place the child figure closer to both a mother and father figure than the other 2 groups. No differences in distance of placement of child figure from either mother or father figures were expected between the non-institutionalized retarded and the normal group.

It was futher hypothesized that all 3 groups would demonstrate one of the three major commonalities of social schemas found by Kuethe (1962), by placing the child figure closer to the mother figure than the father figure.

The results indicated that contrary to prediction both the institutionalized and non-institutionalized retarded placed the child figure closer to both the mother and father figure than the normals. The normals thus were significantly different from both retarded groups on this measure. There was no significant difference between the institutionalized and the non-institutionalized retarded group.

These findings suggest that from the perspective of psychological distance, retardation is more salient than institutionalization. This could be interpreted as indicating that, in so far as psychological distace is concerned, deprivation may not have a direct relationship with desire for adult interaction. Another possibility is that both retarded groups are closer together on extent of social deprivation than the normals.

Although the institutionalized retarded would be expected to have less contact with adults than the non-institutionalized retarded, a definition of social deprivation must also take cognizance of the extent of approval these children receive from adults. It is reasonable to believe that the non-institutionalized retarded receive very limited approval from adults and may be suffering from a greater amount of social deprivation than previously assumed.

Both retarded groups placed the child figure closer to the mother than the father figure as predicted. While the normal group also placed the child figure closer to the mother figure, the difference in distance from the father figure was not significant. It may be that the normal group in this study was actually quite atypical since they were drawn from a culturally deprived background. Tolor and Orange (1969) found that disadvantaged subjects consistently placed further apart all classes of social stimuli. It also may be expected that a certain proportion of "normal" disadvantaged children would still have problems in academic and social adjustment. Various studies (Weinstein, 1965; Fisher, 1967) have shown that socially deviant boys place human figures further apart than normals. Perhaps the simplest interpretation of this is that a significant effect might have been found for the normal children if a greater number of subjects had been used.